

What If I Am Unable to Pay the Rent?

Zen Master Ji Haeng

It has been ten years since the passing of our founding teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, and yet the heart of his teaching legacy continues to beat strongly all around the world. Unveiling the great teacher's memorial at Providence Zen Center evokes poignant memories for me of Dae Soen Sa Nim's teaching and the lasting effect it had on me personally.

It was auspicious meeting Dae Soen Sa Nim when I did. It was the late 1980s, and I was a five-precepts student traveling regularly to Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles to sit their bimonthly Yong Maeng Jong Jin. It was there that I had the privilege of meeting Dae Soen Sa Nim, practicing with him, and hearing his marvelous dharma talks.

At that time, Las Vegas was home to one of the premier Asian doctors in the western United States, Dr. Ju Cheon Lee. Whenever Zen Master Seung Sahn came to Los Angeles to teach, he would also make the hour flight to Las Vegas to see Dr. Lee for acupuncture and moxibustion treatments. During his visits to Las Vegas, I would meet Dae Soen Sa Nim and his entourage at the airport, drive them to their hotel, and be their chauffeur for the visit. It was also my good fortune to have regular kong-an interviews with Dae Soen Sa Nim in his hotel room.

One day I received a phone call and was asked to meet with Dr. Lee. When I arrived, he gave me a set of keys to his office, a schedule of office hours, and told me that I could use his medical practice facility to offer meditation during the off hours and weekends. Much later I learned that Dae

Soen Sa Nim had convinced Dr. Lee that I could be trusted with this responsibility.

Three times a week, for two years until I became a dharma teacher, I moved all the waiting room furniture into the hallway; set up mats, cushions and an altar; conducted practice, and then packed everything up again; and moved the furniture back into the waiting room.

Then, during one of Dae Soen Sa Nim's visits, while driving him, Mu Shim Sunim (now Zen Master Dae Jin) and Mu Sang Sunim from the airport to the hotel, the conversation drifted to practice at Dr. Lee's office. I said that there were enough people practicing now that we were thinking of making the leap from Dr. Lee's office to a new location in an industrial strip mall. But I was concerned: "What if I'm unable to pay the rent?"

Dae Soen Sa Nim listened politely and then turned to Mu Shim Sunim and said, "Tomorrow you call Providence and tell them that if Thom needs extra money for his rent, that they send it to him from my personal account each month." Even now, after so many years, this brings tears to my eyes. He didn't know me so well, yet he had no reservations about my intentions. The best part was that I never once needed to call Providence. Dae Soen Sa Nim's unwavering commitment to the dharma inspired complete try-mind, 100 percent "just do it." Our beautiful Las Vegas Zen Center today requires a significantly larger monthly overhead, but there are no qualms. Just as in the old days, we "only go straight."

Another time I was in Los Angeles right before Buddha's Birthday. Dae Soen Sa Nim sent me over to Tal Mah Sah to help hang prayer lanterns on the ceiling in the Buddha hall. I was given a tall ladder, many lanterns, and some basic instructions. While I worked, all the women were in the kitchen downstairs, laughing and talking as they prepared food for the ceremony.

After a while, one of the bosalnims came back upstairs. I looked down at her from the ladder, smiling to indicate, "Well, what do you think?" Her face turned ashen and her own smile disappeared. She began yelling for the other women to come back upstairs to see what I had done,



Photo: Zen Center of Las Vegas

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just as Dae Soen Sa Nim's car arrived and he walked in the door. One woman pointed at the ceiling and shouted, "Look, look what he has done!" Apparently all the lanterns were hung upside down! They expected Dae Soen Sa Nim to deliver a strong reprimand. Instead he just smiled at me, then turned to the women, dismissing the whole thing by saying, "No problem. This is just Zen style!"

Here again, Dae Soen Sa Nim was able to cut through any attachment to the external trappings of Buddhism, focusing only on a student's pure intentions and sincere try-mind. On another occasion Dae Soen Sa Nim arrived in Las Vegas on a tight schedule, needing to fly out again the next day. After checking in at the Las Vegas Hilton, we drove immediately to Dr. Lee's for a moxibustion treatment. Rather than returning to the hotel to rest, we then had to meet Dr. Lee and his family within an hour for dinner at a fancy Chinese restaurant. I mentioned to Dae Soen Sa Nim that one of our Zen center's practitioners, Ken, had recently suffered a stroke, leaving him paralyzed and deeply frightened by his impairment. His only wish was to have Zen Master Seung Sahn visit him.

Although by now very tired, Dae Soen Sa Nim instructed me to drive first to the medical facility even if it meant

arriving late at the restaurant. He presented my friend Ken with a 108-bead mala, encouraged him to keep practicing, and spoke comfortingly to him, holding Ken's hand throughout the entire visit.

For me this was the most wonderful example of great love and great compassion in the face of need. Despite the distractions of a tight schedule, social obligations and great fatigue, Dae Soen Sa Nim made himself fully available to a suffering person he had never met, giving him his wholehearted attention.

Unveiling our great teacher's memorial no doubt evokes similar memories for each of us who had the good fortune either to meet Dae Soen Sa Nim personally or to encounter his teaching. Surely many of us recall some time in our life and in our practice when some aspect of Dae Soen Sa Nim's teaching made all the difference—awakening our great faith in the dharma, sustaining our great determination to follow the bodhisattva path and evoking the great question of our life.

And so, ten years after his passing, we celebrate Dae Soen Sa Nim's living legacy—his clear direction, tireless dedication to the dharma, his Great Love, Great Compassion, Great Bodhisattva Way. ♦

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You have a big nose! That's enlightenment."

Ty Koontz

About 30 years ago (I don't remember the exact year), I was working as a writer/editor for a small press and had the pleasure to interview Master Seung Sahn for a magazine article we were publishing. I did quite a few interviews during that time, and the one with him was the most delightful and unconventional of them all. I had done my homework and prepared a list of questions to ask. When a fellow editor and I showed up for the interview, he took us into his office in the Berkeley Zen Center and sat us all down on the floor in the middle of the room. Then he treated the "interview" like a teaching session, taking our questions and turning them back on us to our confusion and delight. He also took some time to explain how the interview process with a Zen teacher worked, including the use of the stick, shouting and a few other things I can no longer recall. Despite the instruction, we persisted in our role as editors, and the interview was often quite hilarious and had us laughing much of the time. Also, there were many taps for each of

us with his stick—probably more gentle than those his dedicated students received, but still serving as wake-up calls—and also several shouts. He was wonderfully happy throughout the interview and a total pleasure to be with. Sadly, I don't remember much detail about the content (probably because of getting the mind bogged so many times), but I do remember one exchange: I asked him "What is enlightenment?" hoping for a simple definition for our readers. His response: "What is enlightenment? You have a big nose! That's enlightenment." Then he tapped me with his stick. ♦



Ty Koontz has worked in various aspects of publishing since 1982, ultimately specializing in indexing. He has been a lifelong spiritual student. While not aligned with any particular tradition, he has been fortunate to receive the guidance of several fine teachers, most especially Dr. David R. Hawkins. He currently lives a contemplative life in Tucson, Arizona.